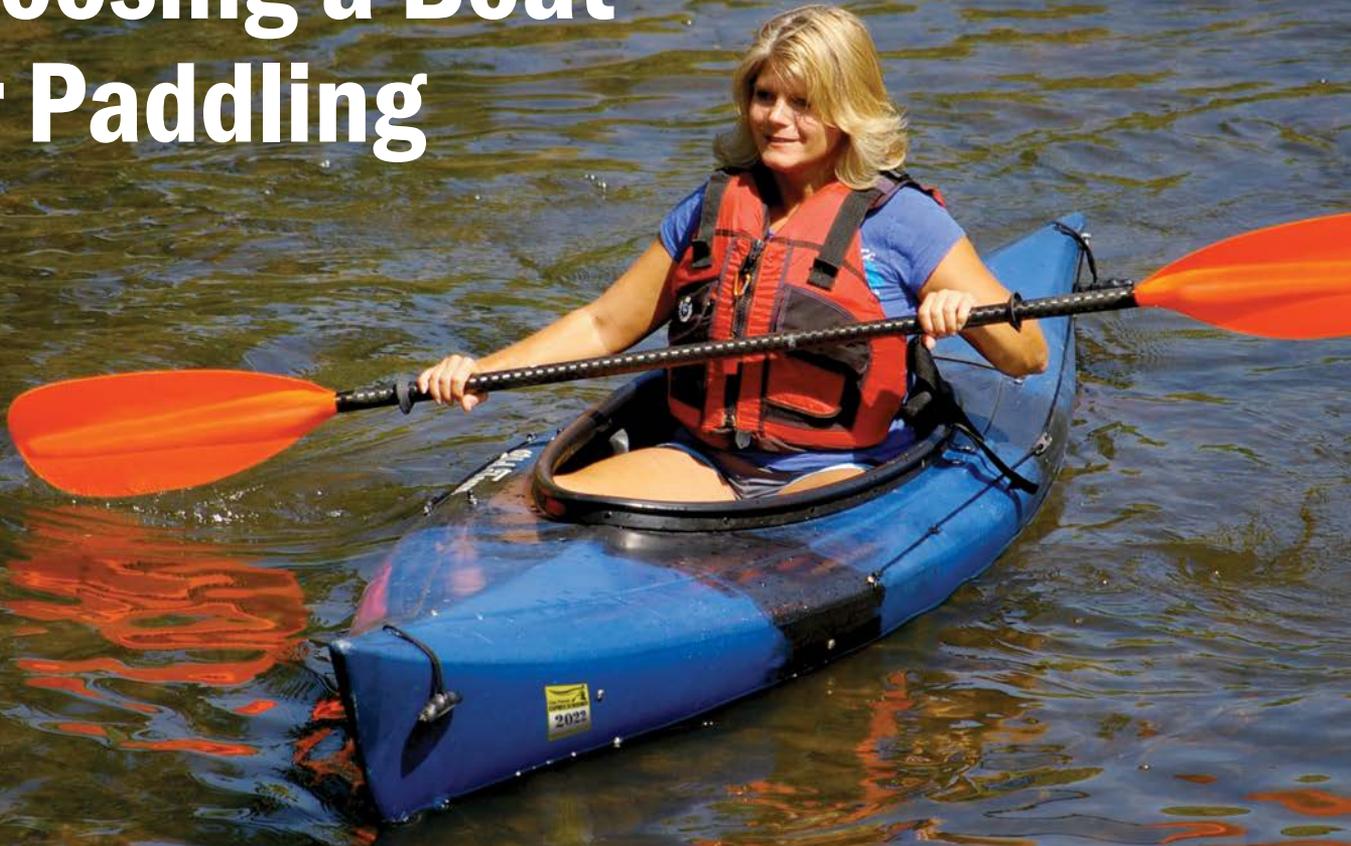




Choosing a Boat for Paddling



by Bob Frye

photos by the author

This was the on-the-water equivalent of a classic car show, minus the chrome. Our destination on a beautiful summer weekend was a beach on the bank of the Allegheny River, where paddlers access a state forest camping area. We pulled up, a flotilla of one 16-foot canoe and four kayaks—three sit-in models and one sit-on-top model. Surrounding us, in an array of shapes, sizes, and colors, were 12 to 15 other boats.

Each boat had its fans. Just as muscle car owners argue the merits of their particular hot rod, paddlers extoll the virtues of their canoe or kayak.

However, the craft ideal for one person isn't automatically the best one for another person. Choosing the most appropriate boat depends on many factors.

Canoes

Canoes are the paddling world's pickup trucks—built to work. The one on our trip, for example, was a tripping

canoe, capable of hauling 1,200 pounds. It is great for paddling with a partner—human, canine, or both—to fish, camp, or hunt.

Recreational canoes still haul plenty—including children too young to paddle themselves—and are shorter and lighter. Solo canoes are smaller but easier to handle.

Aside from size, think shape. Flat-bottom boats are good for beginners, offering good initial stability, meaning they feel secure on calm water. Shallow arch bottoms offer better secondary stability, meaning they roll further without flipping over and cut through wind and waves.

Canoes with a pronounced rocker—the banana-like curve from front to back—are more responsive, turning better in faster water, but do not track, or consistently go straight, as well.

Aluminum canoes are almost indestructible but loud and cold. Composite canoes are lighter but still sturdy. Wooden canoes are beautiful but require regular maintenance.

Finally, if you want to use a motor, square stern canoes are best.

Kayaks

Kayaks vary widely, with some designed for niches like whitewater running or off-shore touring.



When deciding which canoe or kayak to buy, think about what kind of paddling you want to do and on what kinds of waters.

Recreational kayaks are good beginner boats and often the least expensive. Recreational kayaks are typically short—9- to 12-feet—and wide with good initial stability. However, these same qualities make them inefficient to paddle.

Touring kayaks including tandem models are longer—12- to 14-feet—and narrower, with good secondary stability. Meant for longer outings, they usually offer more comforts, like knee braces and better seats.

Both types of kayaks come in sit-in and sit-on-top models. Sit-in kayaks are sometimes harder to get in and out of but sit lower and are warmer and drier. Sit-on-top kayaks are easier to access and sometimes preferred by larger paddlers.

Sit-on-top fishing kayaks, meanwhile, are comparatively expensive. But, if you plan to fish seriously, sit-on-top kayaks are more stable. They are versatile, with room for add-ons like fish finders. Some even come with pedal drive systems, so you can move hands-free.

Then, there are inflatable kayaks. Not necessarily inexpensive—some cost as much as a hard body kayak. If you have little storage space at home, inflatable kayaks are a good option. The better ones are carried like a backpack and feature multiple air chambers.

In the end, it is all about fit. Check manufacturer websites for information on how and where boats perform best. Rent boats from outfitters to see what you like and don't like. Consider where you plan to paddle and what you plan to do.

Then, when buying a canoe or kayak, you will get the best one for you. □



Tripping canoes are long and typically wide, which allows them to haul larger loads. They may also be used for day trips.



Inflatable kayaks are not toys, nor are they priced like toys. The better inflatable kayaks are compact when deflated, making them easier to store and easier to transport.